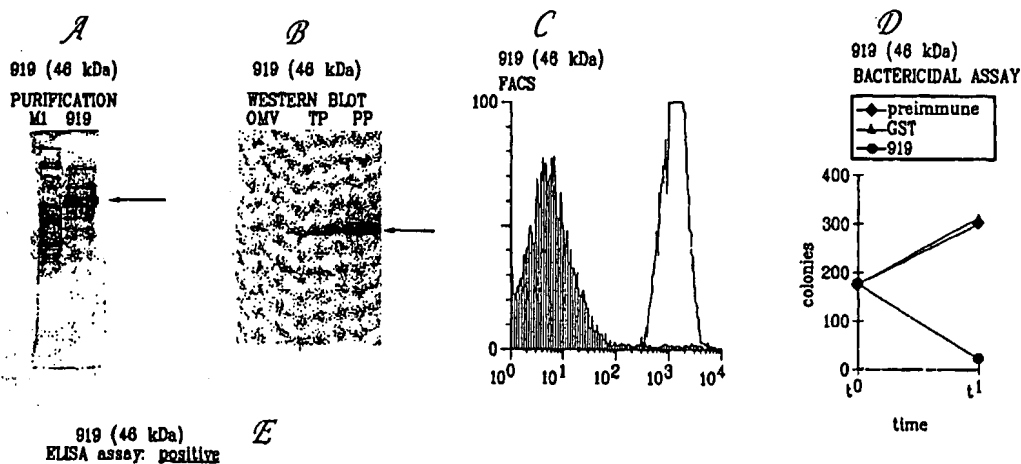




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## (57) Abstract

The invention provides methods of obtaining immunogenic proteins from genomic sequences including *Neisseria*, including the amino acid sequences and the corresponding nucleotide sequences, as well as the genomic sequence of *Neisseria meningitidis B*. The proteins so obtained are useful antigens for vaccines, immunogenic compositions, and/or diagnostics.

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## NEISSERIA GENOMIC SEQUENCES AND METHODS OF THEIR USE

This application claims priority to provisional U.S. application serial no. 60/132,068, filed 30 April 1999; PCT/US99/23573, filed 8 October 1999 (to be published April 2000); and Great Britain application serial no. GB-0004695.3, filed 28 February 2000.

This invention relates to methods of obtaining antigens and immunogens, the antigens and immunogens so obtained, and nucleic acids from the bacterial species: *Neisseria meningitidis*. In particular, it relates to genomic sequences from the bacterium; more particularly its "B" serogroup.

## BACKGROUND

*Neisseria meningitidis* is a non-motile, gram negative diplococcus human pathogen. It colonizes the pharynx, causing meningitis and, occasionally, septicaemia in the absence of meningitis. It is closely related to *N. gonorrhoea*, although one feature that clearly differentiates meningococcus from gonococcus is the presence of a polysaccharide capsule that is present in all pathogenic meningococci.

*N. meningitidis* causes both endemic and epidemic disease. In the United States the attack rate is 0.6-1 per 100,000 persons per year, and it can be much greater during outbreaks. (see Lieberman *et al.* (1996) Safety and Immunogenicity of a Serogroups A/C *Neisseria meningitidis* Oligosaccharide-Protein Conjugate Vaccine in Young Children. *JAMA* 275(19):1499-1503; Schuchat *et al* (1997) Bacterial Meningitis in the United States in 1995. *N Engl J Med* 337(14):970-976). In developing countries, endemic disease rates are much higher and during epidemics incidence rates can reach 500 cases per 100,000 persons per year. Mortality is extremely high, at 10-20% in the United States, and much higher in developing countries. Following the introduction of the conjugate vaccine against *Haemophilus influenzae*, *N. meningitidis* is the major cause of bacterial meningitis at all ages in the United States (Schuchat *et al* (1997) *supra*).

Based on the organism's capsular polysaccharide, 12 serogroups of *N. meningitidis* have been identified. Group A is the pathogen most often implicated in epidemic disease in sub-Saharan Africa. Serogroups B and C are responsible for the vast majority of cases in the

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United States and in most developed countries. Serogroups W135 and Y are responsible for the rest of the cases in the United States and developed countries. The meningococcal vaccine currently in use is a tetravalent polysaccharide vaccine composed of serogroups A, C, Y and W135. Although efficacious in adolescents and adults, it induces a poor immune response and short duration of protection, and cannot be used in infants (e.g., Morbidity and Mortality weekly report, Vol. 46, No. RR-5 (1997)). This is because polysaccharides are T-cell independent antigens that induce a weak immune response that cannot be boosted by repeated immunization. Following the success of the vaccination against *H. influenzae*, conjugate vaccines against serogroups A and C have been developed and are at the final stage of clinical testing (Zollinger WD "New and Improved Vaccines Against Meningococcal Disease". In: *New Generation Vaccines, supra*, pp. 469-488; Lieberman *et al* (1996) *supra*; Costantino *et al* (1992) Development and phase I clinical testing of a conjugate vaccine against meningococcus A (menA) and C (menC) (*Vaccine* 10:691-698)).

Meningococcus B (MenB) remains a problem, however. This serotype currently is responsible for approximately 50% of total meningitis in the United States, Europe, and South America. The polysaccharide approach cannot be used because the MenB capsular polysaccharide is a polymer of  $\alpha(2-8)$ -linked *N*-acetyl neuraminic acid that is also present in mammalian tissue. This results in tolerance to the antigen; indeed, if an immune response were elicited, it would be anti-self, and therefore undesirable. In order to avoid induction of autoimmunity and to induce a protective immune response, the capsular polysaccharide has, for instance, been chemically modified substituting the *N*-acetyl groups with *N*-propionyl groups, leaving the specific antigenicity unaltered (Romero & Outschoorn (1994) Current status of Meningococcal group B vaccine candidates: capsular or non-capsular? *Clin Microbiol Rev* 7(4):559-575).

Alternative approaches to MenB vaccines have used complex mixtures of outer membrane proteins (OMPs), containing either the OMPs alone, or OMPs enriched in porins, or deleted of the class 4 OMPs that are believed to induce antibodies that block bactericidal activity. This approach produces vaccines that are not well characterized. They are able to protect against the homologous strain, but are not effective at large where there are many antigenic variants of the outer membrane proteins. To overcome the antigenic variability, multivalent vaccines containing up to nine different porins have been constructed (e.g.,

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Poolman JT (1992) Development of a meningococcal vaccine. *Infect. Agents Dis.* 4:13-28). Additional proteins to be used in outer membrane vaccines have been the opa and opc proteins, but none of these approaches have been able to overcome the antigenic variability (e.g., Ala'Aldeen & Borriello (1996) The meningococcal transferrin-binding proteins 1 and 2 are both surface exposed and generate bactericidal antibodies capable of killing homologous and heterologous strains. *Vaccine* 14(1):49-53).

A certain amount of sequence data is available for meningococcal and gonococcal genes and proteins (e.g., EP-A-0467714, WO96/29412), but this is by no means complete. The provision of further sequences could provide an opportunity to identify secreted or surface-exposed proteins that are presumed targets for the immune system and which are not antigenically variable or at least are more antigenically conserved than other and more variable regions. Thus, those antigenic sequences that are more highly conserved are preferred sequences. Those sequences specific to *Neisseria meningitidis* or *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* that are more highly conserved are further preferred sequences. For instance, some of the identified proteins could be components of efficacious vaccines against meningococcus B, some could be components of vaccines against all meningococcal serotypes, and others could be components of vaccines against all pathogenic *Neisseriae*. The identification of sequences from the bacterium will also facilitate the production of biological probes, particularly organism-specific probes.

It is thus an object of the invention is to provide Neisserial DNA sequences which (1) encode proteins predicted and/or shown to be antigenic or immunogenic, (2) can be used as probes or amplification primers, and (3) can be analyzed by bioinformatics.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 919 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 2 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 279 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 3 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 576-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

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Fig. 4 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 519-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 5 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 121-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 6 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 128-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 7 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 206 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 8 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 287 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 9 illustrates the products of protein expression and purification of the predicted ORF 406 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 10 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 919 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 11 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 279 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 12 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 576-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 13 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 519-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 14 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 121-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 15 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 128-1 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 16 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 206 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 17 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 287 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

Fig. 18 illustrates the hydrophilicity plot, antigenic index and AMPHI regions of the products of protein expression the predicted ORF 406 as cloned and expressed in *E. coli*.

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Claims

1. A method for identifying an amino acid sequence, comprising the step of searching for putative open reading frames or protein-coding sequences within one or more of *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.
2. A method according to claim 1, comprising the steps of searching a *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequence for an initiation codon and searching the upstream sequence for an in-frame termination codon.
3. A method for producing a protein, comprising the step of expressing a protein comprising an amino acid sequence identified according to any one of claims 1-2.
4. A method for identifying a protein in *N. meningitidis*, comprising the steps of producing a protein according to claim 3, producing an antibody which binds to the protein, and determining whether the antibody recognises a protein produced by *N. meningitidis*.
5. Nucleic acid comprising an open reading frame or protein-coding sequence identified by a method according to any one of claims 1-2.
6. A protein obtained by the method of claim 3.
7. Nucleic acid comprising one or more of the *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.
8. Nucleic acid comprising a nucleotide sequence having greater than 50% sequence identity to a nucleotide sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

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9. Nucleic acid comprising a fragment of a nucleotide sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

10. Nucleic acid according to claim 9, wherein the fragment is unique to the genome of *N. meningitidis*.

11. Nucleic acid complementary to the nucleic acid of any one of claims 7-10.

12. A protein comprising an amino acid sequence encoded within one or more of the *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

13. A protein comprising an amino acid sequences having greater than 50% sequence identity to an amino acid sequence encoded within one or more of the *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

14. A protein comprising a fragment of an amino acid sequence encoded within one or more of the *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

15. Nucleic acid encoding a protein according to any one of claims 6-8.

16. A computer, a computer memory, a computer storage medium or a computer database containing the nucleotide sequence of a nucleic acid according to any one of claims 7-11.

17. A computer, a computer memory, a computer storage medium or a computer database containing one or more of the *N. meningitidis* nucleotide sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO 1 and the NMB open reading frames.

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18. A polyclonal or monoclonal antibody which binds to a protein according to any one of claims 12-14 or 6.
19. A nucleic acid probe comprising nucleic acid according to any one of claims 5, 7-10, or 15.
20. An amplification primer comprising nucleic acid according to any one of claims 5, 7-10, or 15.
21. A composition comprising (a) nucleic acid according to any one of claims 5, 7-10, or 15; (b) protein according to any one of claims 12-14; and/or (c) an antibody according to claim 18.
22. The use of a composition according to claim 21 as a medicament or as a diagnostic reagent.
23. The use of a composition according to claim 21 in the manufacture of (a) a medicament for treating or preventing infection due to Neisserial bacteria and/or (b) a diagnostic reagent for detecting the presence of Neisserial bacteria or of antibodies raised against Neisserial bacteria.
24. A method of treating a patient, comprising administering to the patient a therapeutically effective amount of a composition according to claim 21.